

Ormiston House  
Reservoir Drive, Fairmount Park  
Philadelphia  
Philadelphia County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-187

HABS  
PA,  
51-PHILA,  
275-

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Addendum to  
Ormiston House  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington D.C. 20013-7127

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Location: A lot bordered by Randolph Drive to the northeast, Kelly Drive to the northwest and Reservoir Drive to the south, East Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Erected by Edward Burd in 1798, Ormiston is a well-preserved part of the villa group that developed along Edgeley Point Lane in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Early documentation of the orchard and formal garden that once graced Burd's Arcadian retreat places Ormiston more clearly within the context of its original landscape than is possible with any of the surrounding villas. Along with similar properties, Burd's estate was purchased by the City of Philadelphia during the mid-nineteenth-century formation of Fairmount Park. The benefits of a landscape that had once attracted exclusive private development were thus extended to the public at large.

Description: Standing approximately 150' north of Reservoir Drive, Ormiston is a two-and-a-half story, late Georgian house built of red brick on a central-hall plan. Although all four walls are divided into three bays, the house is deeper than it is wide. The building's American-bond brickwork gives way to Flemish bond on the front, and the facade is also adorned with a simple Tuscan porch; a smaller, pedimented version of this porch is attached to the rear of the house. Off-center chimneys protrude from the north and south sides of Ormiston's hip roof, while Federal-Style dormers on the east and west sides emphasize the house's central axis. The roof terminates in a balustraded deck. Fenestration consists of six-over-nine-light sashes on the first floor, six-over-six-light sashes on the second floor and follows a regular pattern on all walls except the north. Modern partitions obscure the original eleven-room layout that included a basement kitchen, but early moldings, fireplaces, a Scottish bake oven and other early interior features survive.

History: Edward Burd, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Prothonotary and veteran of the Revolution, acquired roughly 45 acres of land off Edgeley Point Lane in 1793. Five years later he built Ormiston on the property, naming the villa after his grandfather's Scottish estate (Rodrigues, p.20-21). A detailed elevation and site plan of Ormiston drawn by architect John Hills in 1799 shows a formal garden just east of the house and an orchard to the south. In addition, the plan includes the footprint of Bellville, an earlier house that was part of Burd's 1793 purchase and stood approximately 300' southwest of Ormiston until 1871.

Burd died in 1833 and the City of Philadelphia bought his estate from his heirs, their heirs and their trustees in 1869. At that time Ormiston became part of Fairmount Park and appears to have stood vacant or been occupied by Park employees until a museum of Philadelphia history opened on the first floor in the 1950s. During the next decade, the Fairmount Park Art Association, Park employees and a day camp all used the house, the camp installing a basement bathroom and making a number of related alterations. Ormiston underwent a comprehensive restoration in 1976 and the garret was converted to a caretaker's apartment in 1987, necessitating the removal of an original partition. The Royal Heritage Society has rented and maintained the house since 1982.

Sources:

Ormiston and Bellville Files, Fairmount Park Commission, Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, PA.

Rodrigues, Debora. "Ormiston: A House in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park," a report prepared for University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Rodrigues), annotated chain of title, and an 1855 fire insurance survey.

Various Collections, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian, 1995.

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